

Achieving Excellence in Academic Work Practices: The Experience of Malaysian Distinguished Professors

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Abstract

To achieve its vision to become a world-class provider for higher education in Asia Pacific, the Malaysian higher education has introduced a systematic strategic plan to develop a culture of academic excellence. Accordingly, a new position, namely a distinguished professor has been introduced as the highest position in the academic career. It is expected that an academic recognised as a distinguished professor projects excellent work practice. So far, there have been only three distinguished professors in Malaysia. Hence, this study aimed to profile the excellent work practices among the distinguished professors framed within Malaysian higher education promotion system. This study adopted a multiple case study consisting of three case studies represented by each distinguished professor. The main source of data collection was the face-to-face interview, which is complemented by written responses from the respondents and document analysis. This study found that all the three distinguished professors achieve excellent performance in all the five promotion assessment categories, which are the teaching and supervision, research and publication, academic recognition and leadership, services for the university and society, and consultation and partnership with the industry. It can be concluded that the identities of Malaysian professors are characterized by the local and global imperatives as they are shaped by not only the specific agenda of the country but also the global trend. Issues related to achieving excellent in work practice were also highlighted. Thus, this paper provides guidance for young academics pursuing for professorship to strategize their career pathway in the higher education sector.

Keywords: academic career, distinguished professor, identities, Malaysian higher education system, work practice

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Contextualized with the dynamism of globalization, transition to knowledge-based society and rapid development of technology, higher education sectors around the world are facing new challenges. Thus, they need to respond to the demands of the changing landscape of global higher education in order to be sustainable. Among the global challenges they faced are the emphasis on mystification and internationalization of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Enders, 2007), increase diversity of student population, changing emphasis towards student-centered learning, and increase utilization of online technology in higher education. All these factors are affecting the academics' work practices that have significant influence on the development of human capital of a nation.

In this respect, the academics' work practice can no longer be considered as primarily teaching, researching and delivering services to the university and the society (Boyer, 1990). Many claim that the academic work practices have become more heterogeneous, complex and fluid. Further, the academics' workload has increased and become more myriad (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012; Kwiek, 2003; MacFarlene, 2011). A study conducted among Australian academic career (Bexley, Arkoudis, & James, 2013) reveals that many academics are overwhelmed by their workloads and the range of responsibilities. They are also concerned that the opportunities

for creativity, innovation and originality are being eroded. As such, it is crucial for academics to respond to these changes in order to be relevant in the realm of higher education.

The academics' work practices are shaped by the socio-cultural context within which the academics are operating (Safiah, 2012). The changes affected the academic work are not only limited to the global pressures, but they are also affected by the strategic planning of a respective government which they are contextualised. In response to the challenges of global higher education, the Malaysian higher education has introduced a systematic strategic plan to develop a culture of academic excellence. One of the strategies is the creation of a new position in the academic career, which is the distinguished professor. This position, the highest position in the academic career is a reflection of excellent academic work practice and it is one of the ways to drive academics to cultivate the culture of academic excellence. So far, three academicians have been appointed as distinguished professor; however, little has been documented on their experiences and work practices in the academic world.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Malaysian academics who have managed to perform well in their profession as they face the challenges in the changing landscape of higher education. This study also uncovers how their work practices are shaped by the agenda envisioned by Malaysian higher education as well as the changes in the global higher education. As such, this study addressed the following question: What are the work practices of the three distinguished professors contextualized within the Malaysian higher education system?

The paper is presented in four parts. While this section provides the introduction, the second part of this paper presents the literature related to the context of Malaysian higher education system. This is followed by the description of the research method, results and discussion, and finally the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Malaysian Higher Education System

The Malaysian higher education is framed within the national higher education policy that has three main agendas, which are establishing a world class university system in Malaysia; making Malaysia a regional education hub; and transforming Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy (Regel et al., 2007, p. 26). These policy agendas can be viewed as responses from the government in meeting the challenges of the changing emphasis of global higher education. To achieve these agendas, a strategic plan to transform the national higher education has been initiated in 2006 and it is now in its second phase. While the first phase focuses on the setting up the framework, the second phase concentrates on enhancing and refining the initial framework. One of the critical agendas in the transformation plan involves the development of a culture of academic excellence. It is anticipated that this agenda can help to foster a world class higher education in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). In this respect, to become an education hub in the Asia Pacific that offers a world class education, it is believed that the cultivation of the culture of academic excellence is crucial for the enhancement of a quality higher education. Further, the Malaysian institutions of higher education have been categorised into three main categories: the Research, Comprehensive and Focused Universities. The research universities are responsible to focus on research and innovation, while the comprehensive universities are responsible to offer wide range of programs. The focused universities concentrate on delivering focused programs. These categorisation provides the respective universities a clear focus on their roles and functions as they strive to become a world-class higher education provider for the country.

2.2 Academic Career in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the academic career encompasses of six levels ranging from the tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, and the most recently introduced position is the distinguished professor, which is considered as the apex of the academic career. The professors are further categorized into three levels that are from the Professor Grade C, Grade B and Grade A. Although the three core responsibilities of the staff academics are teaching, research and service, the involvement of staff academics in these three aspects varies depending on many factors, such as the types of the universities, academic leadership appointment, seniority, and academic specialization (Maimunah & Roziah, 2008).

Recently, to ensure a transparent, fair and consistent appointment and promotion procedure, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia issued a guideline for the promotion and appointment of the professors and distinguished professors in Malaysia. In this respect, the position of the distinguished professor can only be applied by Grade A Professors.

The guidelines outline five criteria for the promotion to professors and it is anticipated that this criteria will eventually shape the profile of the Malaysian Professors. The five criteria of Malaysian Professor are teaching and supervision, research and publication, academic recognition and academic leadership, services to the university and society as well as consultation and industrial or clinical collaboration. Among the five criteria, teaching and supervision as well as research and publication are considered as more important than the other three as they carry more weight. It is argued that these five aspects have direct influence in shaping the identities of the Malaysian professors. The description of the five aspects are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The promotion criteria and descriptors for a professor

Criteria	Descriptors
Teaching & Supervision	Involves in teaching university's course (108 credits) Supervises 7 Masters and 7 PhD students (main supervisor) Achieves good evaluation for teaching
Research & Publications	Leads at least 10 research projects Receives at least RM600,000 worth of research projects Publishes in ISI indexed journal (50) Total citations as determined by the respective university
Academic Recognition & Academic Leadership	Keynote speaker for 4 national and 2 international conference; or Editor for ISI indexed journal; or Evaluator for journal articles (10) or book manuscript (6) or Panel evaluator of academic promotion
Services to the University and Society	Chairman at national (2) and international level (2)
Consultation and Networking with Industry	Provides consultations and expert reference (9)

The position of a distinguished professor is the highest position in the career path of the academic. To be appointed as a distinguished professor, an academic has to demonstrate that he/she qualifies the following criteria.

- i. Receive recognition and appreciation from both local and international bodies;
- ii. Conduct research and has high impact publications; and
- iii. Show significant transformation from being an expert to a scholar in their field of knowledge.

3. Method

To investigate the best practices of academic work among Malaysian academics, the researchers conducted multiple case studies on three professors who have been appointed as the distinguished professor. The rest of this section describes the research method adopted in this study, which include the cases as the research design, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis.

3.1 The Case Study

This study adopted a qualitative collective case study, comprises of three individual case study (Stake, 2005). In principle, this study adopted a biographical research approach as it involved collection and interpretation of the lives of others as part of human understanding (Roberts, 2002). Each case was represented by a professor who has been recently appointed as the distinguished professor, the apex of the academic career ladder in Malaysia. The three professors are identified as Professor A, B and C in order to respect their true identities. The basis for

the selection of the three professors was to benchmark their high performance and achievements working in Malaysian higher education institutions. The three professors were from different field of specializations and worked in different institution of higher education. Two of them (Professor A and C) were attached in a research university, while the other (Professor B) was attached with a comprehensive university. Further, they were from different field of specialization; Professor A specialized in Social Science, Professor B in Islamic Studies and Professor C in the field of Medicine. The professors also have a long tenure which is approximately 35 years of experience working in the Malaysian institutions of higher education; hence, they have had experienced the changes in their work practices resulting from the demands of the global higher education as well as the transformation process of the Malaysian higher education.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data generated for the study were based on multiple data source. Face-to-face interviews were considered as the primary data source and supported by biography questionnaires and printed and electronic documents provided by the respondents. To understand and describe the work practices of the professors, the focus of the data collected were mostly qualitative data based on their experiences and reflections of their daily work practices, the achievements and recognitions they received resulting from their tenure as academicians as well as their perceptions regarding the professionalism of academics (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The main data of this study are derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with three distinguished professors. Prior to the conduct of the interview, a protocol for the initial interview sessions, consisting of guidelines for the conduct of the interviews and possible questions to ask were prepared. Interview questions were prepared following Patton's (2002) structures: opinion, feeling, knowledge and sensory questions. Prior to the interview, respondents were given a short introduction of the study and a written consent to participate in the study.

The interview were conducted at the time and place agreed by the respondents. Each interview lasted about one hour and 30 minutes. The interview sessions were recorded using a digital recorder. After each interview session, the interview data were transcribed and the transcriptions and e-mailed to the respondents to get their approval. Their feedbacks on the accuracy of the transcription were sought for as means to cross check and validate the transcription. They were also allowed to delete or correct any information that they feel do not represent their views or experience or to make changes to the data. These follow-up participant checks ensure that the researcher's subjectivity does not dominate and that participants' perspectives are fairly represented.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were then coded according to the five criteria of a Malaysia professor. They were further analysed and interpreted to derive relevant themes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To facilitate the analysis of the data for a multiple case study research, the data were analysed based on this general procedure. First, within-case analysis was conducted in which data from each case were categorised into five categories based on the five promotion criteria developed by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. Next, based on the within-case analysis, cross- case analysis were conducted in which the themes that emerge based on the analysis of the three cases were compared and contrasted in order to build abstractions across case. For the within case analysis, the description the work practice and the relevant themes arising from within each of the three sites were based on the data analysis procedures involving several stages: coding, categorising and thematic analysis in which all of the three stages were carried out not in progressive sequential manner, rather than involving a recursive process of data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

This section describes the work practices of the three professors to profile the identities of Malaysian professors contextualised within the agenda of the Malaysian higher education system. The description of their work practices is organised according to the five criteria mentioned above.

4.1 Teaching and Supervision

Teaching and supervision is considered as the core responsibilities of staff academics regardless of within which context they are working. It was found that all the three professors were actively involved in teaching the subjects of their expertise. They also supervised PhD and Masters Students. In fact, all the three professors have experienced examining PhD students from universities abroad, such as universities in Brunei, Australia and the USA. This shows that their expertise has been recognised internationally. Another interesting finding is the importance of integration or linkages between research, practical work and teaching. As mentioned by Professor C,

[It has been] just a wonderful opportunity because it was a mixture of teaching, research and I still get to do patient care work which I like, and we do all three. There is no such thing as I only do research. I only teach and I only treat patients. We do all three ... and that was a great set up (Professor C).

This implies that the core responsibilities of teaching, research and practical work (especially in the field of medicine) are no longer viewed as independent; rather they are interrelated to each other. Further, the engagement in practical work and research keeps the staff academic up-to-date with the dynamism of knowledge as well as enhancing the quality of teaching.

4.2 Research and Publication

Data from the study showed that the three professors were involved in research as well as writing. They have had the opportunity to become principal researchers and received research grants amounted to more than RM1 million. It was also found that while Professor A and C were very active in conducting research both locally and internationally, Professor B tend to have lesser involvement in research as he was heavily involved in steering the development of a university. All the three Professors had published in peer-reviewed academic journals. Professor A and B tend to have more publication in magazines, monographs and book chapters, while Professor C has extensive publications in scientific journals.

Among the three professors, Professor C is found to perform significantly well in publication. Her work has been cited more than 1,600 times and has received a H-index of 18. In this regard, she highlighted the importance for academics to strategies by focusing on conducting research that has significant impact as these types of research can be easily accepted for publications.

With respect to language, Professor A who has been writing extensively in Malay language expressed his disappointment regarding the use of ISI indexed journal as the benchmark for the criteria of publication. According to him,

I've written a lot in Malay language, we cannot depend on the Western index publication alone. To be fair, we should use varieties of index. I highlighted issues related to the use of Malay language because we have been ignoring the potential of Malay language and we did not use it as a means to measure our performance and achievements. Sometimes, I feel that we are bound to the criteria that we cannot fulfil and we disregard our own language... (Professor A)

In this context, publication in English language journals has become a concern among staff academics who prefer to write in their native language as their writings and publications in the native language is not recognised in the promotion and appointment procedure.

4.3 Academic Recognition and Academic Leadership

This study found that all the three professors have received national and international recognition in their respective field of knowledge. They have been invited as key note speakers in national as well as international conferences and seminars and as Visiting Professor at universities abroad. They also have been appointed as editors for national and international journals. In fact, Prof. C has been a chief editor in an indexed internationally recognised journal. Further, they have been appointed as evaluators for articles to be published in journals, and book manuscripts. Professor A and C have been appointed as evaluators for research grants proposals at the university as well as the national levels an item which was not included in these criteria.

4.4 Services for the University and Society

The research data showed that all the three professors have contributed their expertise in developing the university within which they are working and their contributions tend to extend to international level. All the three professors have had spent from 3-8 years helming a department of a faculty at their respective universities. In fact, Professor B has had the experience of steering the development of a particular university in Malaysia. They also have been appointed as the chair of several committees at the university, national and international contexts. Professor C specifically, has become the President of an international organisation which has a network of 60 other organisations all over the world.

4.5 Consultation and Partnership with the Industry

Data from the research showed that all the three professors have been actively involved in giving their expert advice to not only the industry but also with the government bodies. For example, Professor A and B had given his expert advice to the Ministry of Education and Professor C had given her advice to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. In particular, Professor A has helped to develop a teaching module for a compulsory university subject in the public university and played significant role in promoting social science research in

scientific research. Professor B has helped to review the Malaysian education system and Professor C has helped to develop a standard ISO document for a particular field in medicine. Professor C has also been the advisors for several medical centres around the world

Another important feature of the profile of Malaysian professor is the values of performing their work practice. Among the values that have emerged in the data are academic excellence, accountability and integrity. Referring this value as intellectual integrity, Professor C expressed her concern by saying that:

As a medical professor, I was in a unique position to not only mould the values of many future generations of doctors, scientists and researchers, but also influence the quality of medical practice and knowledge enrichment in the community. ... I had developed a philosophy that 'excellence and ethical conduct should be the way of life in medical practice and research'. ... Intellectual integrity is expected of academic individually and in university at large. (Professor C)

As emphasised by Professor C, academic excellence and ethical conduct should be the way of life in every academic staff. This is important as the role of staff academics is to develop and educate future generations with high moral values for the nations. These values are reflected in her work practice.

Overall, all the three professors have performed in all the five aspects with some degrees of variations. It can be said that their work practice has become increasingly heterogeneous as the work practices in these five aspects are interrelated and they are contributing to the enhancement of each other. Further, their participations in each of the five aspects vary depending on their ways of performing their work practice and the context within which they are working. Specifically, the work practice of Professors B shows more emphasis on providing services to the university (steering the development of a university) and less emphasis on conducting research. Both Professor A and C were actively involved in research and publication. While Professor A was not satisfied with the expectations of publishing in ISI index journal due to the requirements of English language, Professor C did not show any problems in this matter as almost all of her writing are in English language.

The work practices of Malaysian professors are is not just limited to the university that they are working, but rather they have expanded internationally. This is clearly evident in all the five aspects of their work practices. Hence, this indicates that Malaysian higher education is progressing towards delivering world class higher education. Further, the work of academic has become more significant as their work practice and responsibilities have widened. It is not just limited to contributing to the academic world, but also to the welfare of the nation and society at large.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the work practices of the three distinguished professors have demonstrated an excellent academic work practice. Further, the three distinguished professors have their own strengths and speciality within their field of expertise. For example Professor C showed great strength in conducting research and publishing in high impact journal, Professor A developed his strength and influence through his widespread writings both locally and internationally, while Professor B has the strongest influence in developing and managing. Hence, to achieve excellence in work practice, academics need to find their own strength and work towards establishing their niche so that they can be recognised both nationally and internationally.

The three distinguished professors have performed outstandingly in all the five criteria of Malaysian professor set by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. It is clear that the work practices of the Malaysian professors to a certain extent, have met the five criteria of Malaysian professor as stipulated in the guidelines of promotion and appointment of Malaysian Professors. This means that the identities of Malaysian professor have been largely influenced and shaped by the policy agenda of the Malaysian higher education system that aims at achieving world class higher education system.

It is also concluded that work practises have become internationalised and English language has become important particularly in the area of publications. Another significant attributes of the Malaysian professor is the values of academic excellence, integrity and accountability, which are considered important in building a good moral and responsible human capital for the nation. The findings of this study could help staff academics to strategically plan their career path towards achieving the highest position in the academic career that is the distinguished professors.

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